

P 060240Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2738
INFO GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
HQ USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SANAA 000272

STATE/NEA FOR A/S WELCH
NSC FOR F. TOWNSEND

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/04/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: YEMEN'S GREAT ESCAPE: 23 AL-QA'IDA DETAINEES ARE AT LARGE

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY CDA NABEEL KHOURY FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (S) Summary. On February 3, 23 al-Qa'ida supporters escaped from a maximum security prison in Sanaa. Among the escapees were 13 individuals convicted of participating in the 2000 USS Cole and the 2002 M/V Limburg attacks, including one of the Cole attack ringleaders, Jamal Badawi. (Names and backgrounds of other escapees reported in separate channels.) ROYG officials confirmed to emboffs that the prisoners escaped by digging an underground tunnel from the prison to a nearby mosque. All 23 detainees remain at-large. This is the second prison break in a week, following the un-related escape of two members of an indigenous anti-government group (al-Houthi) from a separate Sanaa prison facility on January 27. These two individuals are still at-large as well. Embassy has restricted internal travel and issued a warden message to that effect, pending further developments.

¶2. (S) In the absence of MOI Alimi, CDA requested and received a call from President Saleh who assured CDA that the escape is the ROYG's highest priority and that he is confident of an imminent arrest. Saleh said, however, that he was most concerned about the weakness of his "services" - a clear reference to the Political Security Organization, which had hitherto been in charge of all terrorism related issues and from whose high-security facility the 23 escaped. (Comment: CDA will report septel on details of his conversation with Saleh. End Comment). End Summary.

Al-Qa'ida Supporters Escape

¶3. (S) On February 3, "26 September" newspaper, an official weekly published by the armed forces, reported that 23 al-Qa'ida supporters escaped from a Political Security Organization (PSO) prison in Sanaa by digging an underground tunnel to a nearby mosque. Among the escapees were 13 individuals convicted of various charges related to the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Aden Harbor and the 2002 attack on the French oil tanker M/V Limburg, including Jamal al-Badawai. Badawai was convicted in 2004 for his role in the Cole attack and originally received the death penalty, which was later commuted to a 15 year sentence.

¶4. (S) This is not the first time Badawai has escaped from prison. In 2003, he and nine other Cole suspects escaped from an Aden prison by digging a hole from the prison bathroom. Badawi and some of the others were subsequently recaptured and tried. Authorities confirmed that Fawaz al-Rabi'i, who received a death sentence for his participation in the Limburg attack, was among the February 3 escapees.

Comment

15. (S) By all accounts, the ROYG has just lost some of its highest value al-Qa'ida prisoners -- individuals whose operational ability and lethality has been proven by past attacks against western and Yemeni targets. The fact that the religious and ideological views of these men probably became even more extreme in prison is not lost on ROYG officials, who have mobilized every security organ in the country to pursue them. In that connection, it is significant that "26 September," a publication tightly controlled by a confidant of President Saleh, broke the story. Official media sources are generally the last to report such incidents, sometimes waiting several days to acknowledge negative stories run by international or independent media outlets. The fact that a government media outlet reported the incident so swiftly is likely an indication that the Government realizes the gravity of this event and the importance of controlling the story.

16. (S) This incident represents a set-back for all the successes the ROYG has had in recent years vis a vis al-Qa'ida. Unless the majority of the 23 are rounded up in the near future, the threat level for the U.S. Mission in Sanaa will have taken a serious turn for the worse. End Comment.

Khoury

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